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ABSTRACT

In 1991 West Virginia's governor announced a 10-year statewide plan that would close 245 schools, primarily in poor, small, and rural communities, and replace them with larger, more "efficient," more urban facilities. The controversy surrounding West Virginia school closings stems from the clash of two sets of beliefs and values. The people in power--legislators, bureaucrats, and school administrators--have visions of the future and of educational progress based on positive views of modernity and urbanization, while their conception of the rural present is based on stereotypes. These beliefs have the ultimate effect of eliminating small schools and the sparsely populated places they serve and sustain. Traditional Appalachian culture is generally stereotyped as passive, fatalistic, and too satisfied with the present. In contrast to these and other, more denigrating, media stereotypes, the rural Appalachian lifestyle encompasses such traditional American values as thrift, productive labor, community, family values, and self-reliance, and also allows time for just living, a quality of experience often lost in more efficient "modern" lifestyles. Educators believe that they should raise students' level of expectations from the present-oriented rural way of thinking and prepare students to leave home in search of a future somewhere else. A more innovative approach to rural education, emphasizing self-study and local analysis, would surely produce some students who would stay and develop an economically viable rural home in the 21st century. Such an approach, pursued in small schools and rural communities, could fulfill the brave promises of educators and politicians and allow rural people to control their destiny. (SV)

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Rural Schools and Modern Visions

by Deirdre Purdy

ED 370 733

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In 1991 West Virginia Governor Gaston Caperton made a national announcement of his 10-year school-building plan: to close 245 schools by the year 2000. The irony of a "building plan" that closed schools was apparent to many: namely the people who lived where the schools were closing, in poor, small and rural communities. There were other ironies: this was a plan to save money, but first the state must spend $1.2 billion. It was a plan to equalize educational opportunity, though many students must now travel many hours to get their education. It was a plan to make school facilities larger, more "efficient," more modern and more urban, just as American cities were dismantling their over-large schools and breaking them into more human-scaled institutions. We can see in the school-closing decision-making process in West Virginia, the clash of two sets of values, as school officials insist on one vision of the future and as parents and students in rural communities resist that vision and create their own.

Rural citizens put tremendous and impressive effort into Save Our School movements. They disseminated national research which proved the benefits of smaller schools, and which pointed out the failures of large schools and their greater expense. They brought lawsuits against school systems, elected new school board members, and defeated proposed local bond sales. Although here and there a school was saved, the overall effort was about as effective as throwing peanuts at a tank.

The school-closing juggernaut rolls on for two reasons: first, the state was giving away money only to projects that closed small schools to build large ones. No other plan would be funded. Second, building big, shiny, modern schools in town jibed precisely with the cultural biases of most bureaucrats, legislators and school administrators, who equated "urban" and "modern" with educational progress. "Getting ready for the 21st century" is a phrase beloved by education bureaucrats. That kind of language implies that, unfortunately for rural residents, rugged roads, peaceful hills and scattered rural communities have no place in the future. People who do not share a positive view of "urban" and "modern" are dismissed as troublesome protestors, foot-draggers, nostalgic romantics, and ultimately, interfering fools.

Let me suggest a cluster of beliefs held by such people in power. Their vision of the future is based on positive views of modernity and urbanization, while their conception of the rural present is based on stereotypes. These two views have the ultimate effect of eliminating small schools and the sparsely populated areas they serve and sustain.

Traditional Appalachian culture is generally stereotyped as passive, fatalistic, static, and too satisfied with the present, even with the acknowledgement that there are a few charming elements within the culture. Far better, it is thought, is modern culture, which is restless, striving, and dynamic, with problem-solving capability and achievement orientation. This very elitist and false interpretation of Appalachian culture is a media-created and widely disseminated view. There are no contemporary and realistic media images of rural life. The stereotypes of jug-suckin', fiddle-strokin', porch-sittin', G-droppin', hound-happy mountaineers make it very difficult for mountain people to appreciate their riches. Many school bureaucrats come from the local culture and repudiate it even more strongly because they have "risen" from it to become modern power-brokers themselves. It is almost as if we can't see ourselves for the clutter of media overlay, all fast cuts, bright colors, and loud insistent music, that tells us modern life is a commercial, a rock video, and urban docudrama, and we as rural people are not in it.

"Modern" does not, cannot, look like small mountain homes nestled on and claiming level ground, with generous porches where family and neighbors visit. The houses are owner-built,

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but square and tight, appropriate to the location, climate and self-sufficient society. The houses have full cellars and large gardens. People shop carefully and entertainment focuses on homelife. People's clothes may be homemade or handed down, but they are clean. This is not just Poverty, with a capital "P," but middle-class, with a little "m." There are few 15,000 square-foot houses with full walk-in closets and walk-in refrigerators. There is little conspicuous-ridiculous consumption. All this is the TV-land future. Rural reality is a lifestyle that focuses more on "life" than on "style."

This sort of description used to define the Good Life: thrift, productive labor, land ownership, plain speech, family values, self-reliance with community support. These are traditional American values, and remain traditional Appalachian values on the small farmsteads, in the small towns, and in the tiny mountain churches. Now, self-styled pragmatists, "realists," futurists, all want to dismiss this picture as romantic and nostalgic. No, no, I want to say, this is the present reality; it endures here, for now. It can continue unless it is abandoned by a generation taught to reject it in favor of the shop windows of modernity, all alluring glitter and glow.

Educators believe that they best serve their students by raising students' level of expectation from the static, non-productive, rural way of thinking. The students are too content with the present, not forward-looking like their leaders. The pursuit of happiness is the message: getting it, maybe not. We must be ever onward and upward: more, greater, higher, better, richer... We've lost the notion of paradise as an end, a point of perfection, and replaced it with the images of rocket trajectory. This modern America is exciting, but never satisfying.

The future is always somewhere else. Our schools want to train our kids to leave home and find the future. Our educational system had taken as its goal preparing our children to leave. How can they stay? There are no jobs. People must go where the jobs are--like the movement of cattle to the feedlots. "They serve no purpose staying here." Ah, but whose purposes do we all serve?

Educators argue that life in the countryside is not fulfilling when there are no sources of employment. "Good schools in such places are charged to export students: that is, they are charged with intermediating between history and "progress," and between tradition and "reality," as Alan DeYoung writes in his study of school consolidation.

But reality is a social construct that defines tradition, history, progress, and everything else. It can be changed by new viewpoints. New viewpoints are developed by new minds doing disciplined study of old questions in their young, unique and individual ways. That's education. Eliot Wigginton's ideas about education are important: Appalachian students should study their Appalachian culture. However, notice how often his students find the "granny woman," the herbalist, the fiddler. They have pre-defined their Appalachian reality in limited terms and then documented it.

Present, 1994-Appalachian reality is more manifold and much more modern than the *Foxfire* vision of Appalachia. Hundreds of thousands of people in West Virginia make their living in rural areas, and there is potential for job-expansion in the state. There is a long-standing appreciation for pragmatic pedagogy in American educational history, that would allow innovative topics to be studied in school. Here in Appalachia such topics might include: beef cattle and hay production on marginal land; recreation in community parks; national highway cost and benefit analysis; or the economics of fast food franchise operations. High school students could study those and many more topics important to their own counties. They could research them, document statistics, write reports, find out how and where to get them published, and publish the information themselves. Through such self-study and local analysis would surely produce at least some students who would choose to stay and find ways to make it an economically viable home in the 21st century.

It is economically easier to be at home here, actually, although that means accepting some job uncertainty. Low property taxes, cheap land, cheap housing, close-at-hand recreational facilities, and less pressure to spend money on consumer goods, all translates into economic advantages in living in mountain communities. It's

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a civil life, too, living among neighbors who "throw up" their hand when you drive by, bring you pork the day they butcher, or organize a benefit for someone in need in the community. Is it a better life to have enough money to do all this for yourself? I don't think so. And, though it might be frightening to some modern people, you don't need to work 40 hours a week, fifty weeks a year, plugged into the salary machine and at someone's beck and call, to be sure you have enough money to sustain yourself economically. In fact, you may not be able to get 40 hours a week of work. But that's O.K., because you don't need so much money. What you need is time. Time to till your garden, build your house, can your food, feed your hog, and read. And isn't life, in the end, about time and not money? Life is time.

The prophets of modernity used to prophesy that modern man wouldn't have to earn his living with the sweat of his brow. Remember, the appliances that were to save time, and the factories which would turn out goods without so much human help, so we would have time to read, to think, to walk in the garden? Turns out you're locked into the money economy, and your time is not your own. But present-day Appalachia with its low-rent living, requires less money, so gives you more time--and the garden to walk in.

The brave promises of our educators and our political leaders could just as well be fulfilled in small schools sustaining rural communities. "Taking control of events and circumstances, controlling your destiny," these are not the province only of cities, nor only of money, nor only happening somewhere else. But they will be if those in power, with their stunted imaginations, fund only big schools, which must be in town. The educational future will look just as they prophesied: big and urban. And they will say it was inevitable, or, that we, being passive and fatalistic, let it happen without a fight.

Note: In 1990 the West Virginia Legislature, at Caperton's behest, formed the School Building Authority, which sold bonds to finance the construction, a practice the W.V. Supreme Court found unconstitutional in mid-1993. Nevertheless, 200 schools have been closed although only half the needed new construction has been funded. See also: Alan J. DeYoung, The Life and Death of a Rural American High School: Farewell, Little Kanawha, *New York, Garland Publishers, 1994.*

Deidre Purdy is a school board member in Calhoun County, West Virginia. She is a court reporter.

New Book Announcement

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A RURAL AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL: FAREWELL, LITTLE KANAWHA.

by Alan J. DeYoung
New York: Garland Publishers, 1994.

Most scholarship on American education involves metropolitan schools. The comparatively few works in the literature about rural schools describe 19th and early 20th-century rural school dynamics. But there remain thousands of rural American schools, ever pressured to consolidate because of declining economies and school resources, and lack of concern for the importance of small communities in national school reform policies.

DeYoung's qualitative study is organized around the socio-economic history of a county with parallel chapters on the history of that locale's education, and on a particular school. Oral histories interviews, county histories, newspaper accounts, and written personal accounts, forcefully articulate the factors involved in the emergence, decline, and demise of a rural West Virginia high school between 1920 and 1990. This study is particularly timely and informative in light of current school closings and funding wars across the nation. An index is provided.

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Requests for permission to reprint materials and reader's comments regarding this issue of *Across the Ridge* are welcome and should be sent to Alan DeYoung; Appalachian Center; 641 South Limestone Street; University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY 40506-0333.

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